

## Managing scarcity of grass

As the first rotation ends and the second begins farmers are now finding that grass is tight. A lot of farms opened this spring with high average farm covers of over 1,200 kg dry matter per hectare. Most of this grass has been grazed off on the past 2 – 3 weeks. As little or no grazing was done in February the fields that were grazed first now have covers of 600-800 kg dm/hectare when ideally they should be around 1,000-1200 kg dm/hectare. The wet spring also made fertiliser application difficult and the recommended application of 85-90 kg of nitrogen per hectare (70 units/acre) by the 1<sup>st</sup> April has not been spread. Growth rates also have been around half of what you would expect in recent weeks (15 – 20 kg/ha/day) due to the cold wet weather.

This brings a few problems at farm level, firstly there is not enough grass to make up all of the forage in the diet. Secondly grass below 1,000kg dry matter/hectare is low in fibre and low in energy, and cows will find it difficult to fill themselves on this type of material. Thirdly allocating enough grass to the cows means giving them a bigger area per day which has the danger of speeding up the second rotation. The second rotation should be held to 21-24 days.

Typically, farmers in Co. Limerick would plan on the last rotation finishing some where around the 10<sup>th</sup> April. The solution is to stretch out the grass at the end of the first rotation and the start of the second. This can be done firstly by increasing the concentrates up to 6/7 kg for the next week to 10 days. If this then isn't enough, the silage in the diet will have to be increased. Around 6 kg of concentrates, 6 kg dry matter from grazed grass and 6 kg of dry matter from silage should have cows reasonably well fed. Although having so much silage in the diet isn't ideal for the time of year it may be the best option for many just for a few days to get them out of danger. It is important to try to maintain at least a third of the diet in the form of grazed grass. There seems to be plenty of silage still left on farms and even though it may not be of great quality it will help to fill cows up and hold the rotation.

Grass growth will take off as soon as we get warmer weather and given the right conditions the situation could turn around in a couple of days. This is why it is important to get enough fertiliser on as soon as possible so there is enough nitrogen to meet the burst of growth when it comes. Although many have missed out the 85-90kgs of N per hectare by 1<sup>st</sup> April, it is not too late to catch up. Fertiliser application has to be prioritised and farmers need to be opportunistic with the weather and ground conditions.